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PROGRAM The Merv Griffin Show

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SUBJECT Interview with Stansfield Turner

MERV GRIFFIN: My next guest is a former Navy Admiral who served as Director of the CIA under President Carter from 1977 to 1981. He's critical of the way the Agency's run today, and outlines his observations in his new book, Secrecy and Democracy: The CIA in Transition. He also plays a mean game of tennis.

Would you help me in welcoming Stansfield Turner?

[Applause]

GRIFFIN: You got your pants on right?

ADMIRAL STANSFIELD TURNER: Well, you know, Merv, the last time when we played tennis, I fell down so much, I had holes in the knees. And when I turned it around to keep my knees from freezing, you accused me of trying to deceive you and make you think I was running backwards.

GRIFFIN: Well, we played against each other when he was Director of the CIA. And, of course, the first intimidating thing is he arrived with bodyguards, who stood in the corner of the thing. And you don't want to serve to hard with a guy with a bodyguard.

ADMIRAL TURNER: And secret tennis balls.

GRIFFIN: And secret tennis balls, right, that were wired for sound. And he walked out on the court with his pants on backward. Now, to which I said, "Mr. Director, is that a problem in the CIA?" He gave me a very dirty look.

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ADMIRAL TURNER: We're pretty backward people.

GRIFFIN: Well, you did take an awful lot of kidding. I think Carl Reiner said to you, "Well, he wants to see where he's been."

[Laughter]

GRIFFIN: He got kidded the whole weekend on that.

ADMIRAL TURNER: The worst part was I lost to you, Merv. That's all I cared about.

GRIFFIN: I had a heck of a -- Jimmy Connors hits a good ball. He was my partner.

Coming from a military background, Mr. Turner, what did you perceive the CIA to be?

GRIFFIN: Well, when I first arrived in 1977, it was right after the major investigations in 1975-76 in which some past errors and abuses were revealed. And I found it was an agency hunkering down. The professionals were conscientious. They didn't want to take any more risks, lest they get in trouble. And my problem was, you have to take risks to do intelligence. So I had to encourage them back into risk-taking, but at the same time insure it didn't get out of control and they'd get into trouble and errors again.

GRIFFIN: Right.

There are an awful lot of intelligence agencies in Washington that seem to be bumping into each other. You have Army Intelligence, Navy Intelligence, FBI, CIA, Marine Intelligence. I'm sure there's some other intelligence in Washington.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, there are a few intelligent people, too.

[Laughter]

GRIFFIN: There are an awful lot of intelligence agencies. And, of course, you have the Congress, who has a...

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, we have 12 different intelligence agencies. I think we do need most of them. I'd like to do away with the Army, Navy and Air Force and put it all in one, which we have already in the Defense Intelligence Agency.

You need some competition because you and John and I

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will all come to different conclusions from the same facts. And we need to have people looking at things differently to be sure we don't overlook something important.

GRIFFIN: But aren't you liable to all bump each other off?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well...

GRIFFIN: "Gee, I didn't know you're a spy."

"Oh yes, I do."

ADMIRAL TURNER: There is a problem if there is too much competition. We find some of the agencies don't share everything with the others. Some of them go out and put things on the street ahead of time, before they have checked with other people. And I'd like to see that competition narrowed. And I've made some recommendations in my book for how to do that.

GRIFFIN: In the time that you served as Director, didn't we have, though, some major problems, like the Russians walking into Afghanistan?

ADMIRAL TURNER: We predicted that.

GRIFFIN: You did predict that.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes.

GRIFFIN: What about the hostages that were held in Iran?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, the whole Iranian situation, we didn't do as well as we should have. But we did let people know that the Shah was in a lot of trouble over there. The big problem was we made one bad assumption. We assumed that because the Shah had such an enormous army and police power, that even if this dissidence built up, that he'd step in and knock it down, he would not let them take his throne away.

Merv, he didn't do that. And we'll never know why. Maybe he was so out of touch with his country that he didn't realize how deeply he was in trouble. Maybe, Merv, the doctors had told him he was a dying man, and he couldn't face the tough decision.

But we missed in that assumption, which seemed realistic at the time, proved to be wrong.

GRIFFIN: Do you want to jump in here, John?

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JOHN CHANCELLOR: I want to jump in here and say something about what Admiral Turner did as Director of Central Intelligence.

I don't think you've been given enough credit for it.

And that is that a lot of people think of the CIA as cloak-and-dagger spies, assassinations, poison, things like that. The fact is that the CIA is one of the most brilliant research and analysis organizations in the world. And I don't know, half of those people who work in Langley have never -- don't know what a dirty trick is. But they can predict with great accuracy who's going to be hungry in the world, what political changes are going to be made.

When Admiral Turner was the Director of Central Intelligence, he began to open the Agency up to people like me, to the press. You made -- we got maps from the CIA. I still have an atlas of the polar regions that says "CIA" on it that I kept on top of the coffee table for months because it looked so secret and marvelous.

ADMIRAL TURNER: And there are a lot of secrets at the South Pole.

CHANCELLOR: Well, plus the fact is that you brought a lot of air into it. And I think for many of the people who work there, you began to redeem their reputation, because it had been in trouble before. And the CIA has a lot of very distinguished scholars and scientists on its staff, and I think their reputation was helped.

And he certainly made life easier for people like me.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Thank you, John.

But in addition, what we were trying to do was to reduce the amount of classified information in the whole government. And this recent Walker case shows that there's just too much of that classified information out there, and people don't respect the label. It says secret, and then they read it in the newspaper the next day and they say, "Well, it isn't really secret," and they forget about it and talk about it. And pretty soon some real secrets are out there in the public that should not be.

GRIFFIN: We'll return right after these commercial messages.

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GRIFFIN: What's Mr. Reagan done wrong?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, I don't know whether he's running intelligence well or not. But I do know that almost every day for the last four years you read something in the newspapers saying the CIA is out of control, the CIA is doing illegal or unethical things in Nicaragua, in Beirut, that it's politicizing the intelligence product.

Now, whether those are correct or not, if the public and the Congress gain the impression that the CIA is not performing properly, we're going to be back to 1975-76. The CIA is going to be hurt badly again.

GRIFFIN: If too much is out in the open, don't you play into the hands of the Soviets?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, there's no need to put too much out in the open. If you have a philosophy, as I think the present Administration does, of trying to keep everything secret, you don't keep anything secret, because people, as I say, don't respect it. But you can narrow down what are the real secrets, and set those over here and try to protect them; let the rest of it come out into the public, and you'll protect these others better.

CHANCELLOR: Also, I think you avoid the problem that this Administration and others have had, and that is denying things to the Americans which the Russians know all about.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, that's true. And in my book, they wouldn't let me publish a speech that I made to the alumni of Vassar College when I was Director of Central Intelligence. Now, that's sort of ridiculous.

CHANCELLOR: You submitted the book, you submitted the manuscript to the CIA, and they said, "No, you can't use the Vassar speech."

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's correct.

GRIFFIN: But one of the girls has a book coming out that...

[Laughter]

GRIFFIN: It's true what John says, that the public, because of motion pictures and television and Broadway plays and -- the CIA is always pictured as assassins. But we did deal in that for a while, didn't we? We did assassinate leaders.

ADMIRAL TURNER: No. There is a record of their having

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plotted and thought about some assassinations. They never carried one out.

GRIFFIN: Diem in Vietnam?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, they didn't do any assassination there. That was a policy of the Kennedy Administration to withdraw support from Diem, but not the CIA.

And President Ford in 1976 issued an order that says there'll be no assassinations by our government. President Carter reaffirmed this. President Reagan has reaffirmed that. And I think that's a good policy.

GRIFFIN: So, as Director, you know of no assassinations by the CIA.

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's correct. I can, of course, only certify for the four years I was there. But what I've read of the history, I don't believe there ever were any carried out by the CIA.

GRIFFIN: This is a fascinating book, and it's called Secrecy and Democracy: The CIA in Transition, by Admiral Stansfield Turner.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Thank you, Merv. And nice to see you again.